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Bethell to become England's youngest captain against Ireland



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Al Sadd drawn with defending champions Al Ahli of Saudi

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TENNIS

Rybakina rips No. 1 Sabalenka to book Cincinnati Open semi with Swiatek

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AL SHAQAB RACING'S AL WAKRAH DOMINATES PREMIO UAE PRESIDENT CUP AT SAN SEBASTIAN





Al Wakrah added another group victory to her impressive record with a commanding performance in the Gr 3 (PA) Premio UAE President Cup at San Sebastián, the ninth leg of the championship, in Spain yesterday evening. The seven-year-old mare, trained by Jean De Mieulle, ridden by Olivier d'Andigné, and owned by Al Shaqab Racing, was coming off a fine second-place finish in a Gr 2 (PA) in Germany. This success marks her fourth Group (PA) win. Settled in midfield and racing a touch keenly in the early stages, Al Wakrah travelled comfortably on the inside rail in a race led by Al Zwair. She maintained her position until the home straight, where she switched to the outside, cruising and closing rapidly on the leaders. Quickly taking command, she went clear without being extended to score by two and three-quarter lengths. Lino claimed second, while Extra Time finished third. Bred by Al Shaqab Racing, Al Wakrah is out of Majida, runner-up in a Listed (PA) race over 1,400m at five. She is a half-sister to Ghadah, a Gr 1 (PA) winner over 2,000m at four and winner of a Gr 3 (PA) over the same distance at the same age, and to Subahiyah (Mahabb), third in a Gr 1 (PA) over 2,000m at three.

QATAR STARS LEAGUE

Gharafa make winning start as Wakrah hold Arabi 2-2

Sanchez's Al Sadd to take on Qatar SC, while Belmadi's Al Duhail to meet Al Shahaniya in today's matches

By a Sports Reporter
Doha

Al Gharafa rallied from being 0-2 down to overpower Umm Salal in a six-goal thriller in their Qatar Stars League (QSL) at the Al Bayt Stadium yesterday.

The Cheetahs roared back in the second half and it was the burly Icelandic midfielder Aron Gunnarsson, who shot home superbly after a long dash in the 88th minute to break the deadlock at 2-2 before Senagalese Seydou Sano added the finishing touch deflecting in a Yacine Brahimi cross (90+7') to make it 4-2 for the winners.

Earlier, Antonio Mance (28') and Oussama Tannane (46') had put The Orange Fortress ahead in the first half. Croatian star Mance broke into the 'D' to catch a smart lob over two defenders from Michael Baidoo to surprise the Al Gharafa goalkeeper Khalifa Ababacar while Moroccan winger Tannane latched on to the ball after a mistake by Umm Salal's Ferjani Sassi to go on and score from between the legs of Ababacar.

Umm Salal had more chances, Mance in particular, but they failed to capitalise. Mance also hit the bottom of the left post once.

Al Gharafa came back rejuvenated after the break and soon won a penalty (59') which was coolly converted by their Spanish star Joselu (2-1). A battle ensued and Al Gharafa attacked more fetching the equaliser in the 74th minute with Ahmed Al Ganehi striking from top of the box into the left side of the net. Two minutes later, Brahimi swung in a kick but it hit the right post to fall away. In the 82nd minute, Umm Salal's Tannane came close to striking but hit just over the bar.

Minutes later, Al Gharafa keeper Ababacar made a fine save with his right shoulder while kneeling. Gharafa's efforts to attack paid dividends as Gunnarsson picked on a defence lapse to make a long run before firing in his team's third goal. A deal ball move then saw Brahimi providing a fine cross from the left for a waiting Sano to register the final goal of the match, much to the delight of Al Gharafa coach Pedro Martins.



Al Gharaf captain Yacine Brahimi celebrates with teammates after their victory over Umm Salal in the QSL match at Al Bayt Stadium yesterday.

Earlier, Al Arabi and Al Wakrah shared a 2-2 draw at the Al Thumama Stadium. Al Arabi's new signings Kenyan striker Michael Olunga (15') and Spanish midfielder Pablo Sarabia (38') proved their worth for The Dream Team.

Al Wakrah's Amine Zouhzouh and Redouane Berkane, who replaced him in the 46th minute, scored for Al Wakrah. Al Arabi's Michael Olunga was named the player of the match for his outstanding efforts.

'Beginning is always difficult'

Al Sadd coach Felix Sanchez, whose side will take on Qatar SC in their season opener today, stressed the importance of a good start.

"The first match is always important because a good start to the season is essential, especially for the defending champions, and of course we will strive to get the three points.

"We remember last season, when we were unable to start with a victory. We know that we will face a team that has undergone many changes in the coaching staff and has added new players, so this is a good opportunity for us to start the season with a strong challenge.



Al Arabi's Michael Olunga in action during their QSL match against Al Wakrah at the Al Thumama Stadium yesterday.

"We are the champions of last season and we know that if we want to achieve the same results as last season, we have to start well. The team is very excited and the players are looking forward to the match. We hope to perform well and achieve a positive result," said Sanchez.

Al Sadd goalkeeper Saad al-Dossari said: "The match against Qatar SC will be difficult. Our goal is to perform at our best and achieve victory.

"We had a strong preparation period that included most of the first-team players. We have a group of distinguished players and we are striving for a strong and distinguished season for Al Sadd."

Qatar SC coach Marquez Lopez also sounded confident yesterday. "It will be an important test, but I am confident in my team's ability to make a good start. We have had a good preparation period and we are ready for our first match in the league. Our goal is always to focus. It is well known that the opening match is of great importance, especially when facing the defending champions. We hope to achieve the desired result," Lopez said.

"Al Sadd are a stable team and we have become a new team. We hope to confirm our development in the upcoming matches, starting with the opening match of our league journey, and to focus on our match to achieve our aspirations and those of our fans," said Marquez.

Meanwhile, Al Duhail coach Djamel Belmadi said his boys are ready for the opener against Al Shahaniya. "We have turned the chapter after our victory over Sepahan and qualified for the AFC Champions League Elite. We are now focused on facing Al Shahaniya on Saturday in the opening match of the league. Our preparations had begun in earnest despite the limited time. I cannot confirm whether or not there will be changes to the team's lineup for the match against Al Shahaniya compared to the lineup that played against Sepahan, but I assure you that everyone is ready to participate whenever called upon," said Belmadi.

SPORT

FOCUS

Bethell to become England's youngest cricket captain

The talented Warwickshire all-rounder is regarded as one of the rising stars of the English game

AFP
London

Jacob Bethell is set to become England's youngest international men's cricket captain after the 21-year-old was named yesterday as skipper for next month's T20 international series in Ireland.

The talented Warwickshire all-rounder is regarded as one of the rising stars of the English game, even though he has still to score his first professional century in any format.

Bethell, however, has still been appointed to lead England in a three-match T20 series against Ireland in Dublin from September 17-21, which will serve as part of the team's preparations for next year's T20 World Cup in India and Sri Lanka.

He is now in line to become England's youngest men's captain in an international match, breaking the record of Monty Bowden, who was 23 years and 144 days old when he led England in a Test against South Africa at Cape Town in 1888/89.

Bethell has featured in just four Test matches but has become a white-ball regular with 13 Twenty20 appearances and 12 one-day internationals to his credit since making his T20 bow in September last year.

"Jacob Bethell has impressed with his leadership qualities ever since he has been with the England squads and the series against Ireland will provide him with the opportunity to further develop those skills on the international stage," said England selector Luke Wright.

Bethell's most recent international appearance was in the fifth and deciding Test against India at the Oval this month where, having replaced injured red-ball captain Ben Stokes, he managed scores of just six and five, while not taking a wicket with his left-arm spin.

But former England captain Michael Vaughan said team management had made a "diabolical" decision to call-up Bethell for such a key match on the back of so little first-class cricket this season.

Bethell has been given the chance to lead England after team chiefs decided regular white-ball captain Harry Brook should take a break following the ODI and T20 series against South Africa.

The all-format quartet of Ben Duckett, Jamie Smith, Jofra Archer and Brydon Carse have also been rested from the Ireland series as they take a breather ahead of the upcoming shopwiece Ashes campaign.

Fast bowlers Mark Wood and Gus Atkinson are not in any of the three squads as they prepare for the tour of Australia, with the first Test in Perth starting on November 21, but uncapped fast bowler Sonny Baker has been included.

Wood had knee surgery in March and missed the whole of the Test series against India.

England squads for ODI and T20 series against South Africa and Ireland:

ODI squad v South Africa:
Harry Brook (capt), Rehan Ahmed, Jofra Archer, Sonny Baker, Tom Banton, Jacob Bethell, Jos Buttler (wkt), Brydon Carse, Ben Duckett, Will Jacks, Saqib Mahmood, Jamie Overton, Adil Rashid, Joe Root, Jamie Smith (wkt)

T20 squad v South Africa:
Brook (capt), Ahmed, Archer, Banton, Bethell, Carse, Liam Dawson,Duckett, Jacks, Mahmood, Overton, Rashid, Phil Salt (wkt), Smith (wkt), Luke Wood

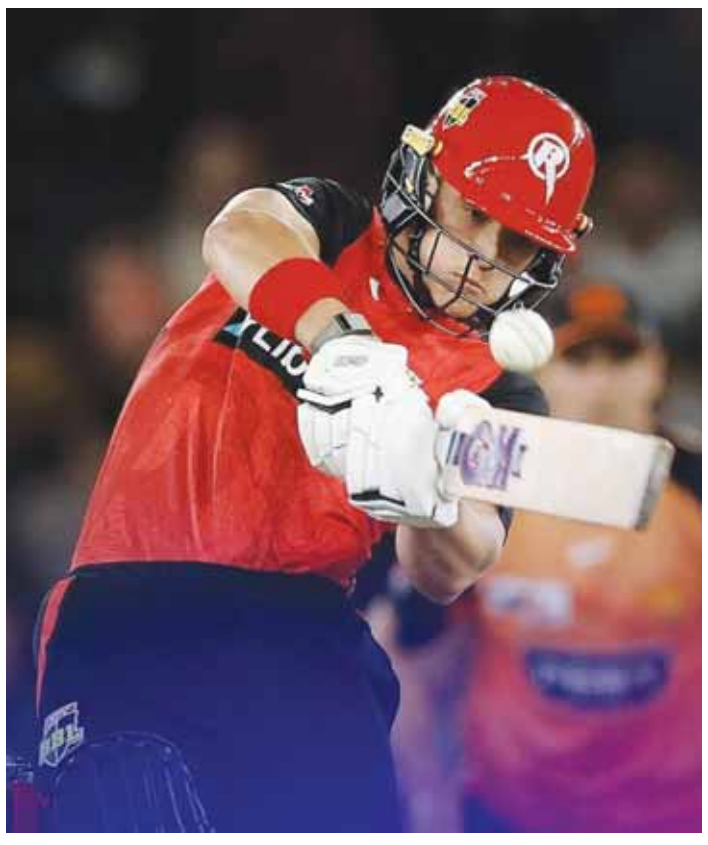
T20 squad v Ireland:
Bethell (capt), Ahmed, Baker, Banton, Buttler, Dawson, Tom Hartley, Jacks, Mahmood, Overton, Matthew Potts, Rashid, Salt (wkt), Wood

FIXTURES

England v South Africa ODIs (1200 GMT unless stated)
Sep 02: 1st ODI, Headingley, Leeds
Sep 04: 2nd ODI, Lord's, London
Sep 07: 3rd ODI, Rose Bowl, Southampton (1000 GMT)

England v South Africa T20s (1730 GMT unless stated)
Sep 10: 1st T20, Sophia Gardens, Cardiff
Sep 12: 2nd T20, Old Trafford, Manchester
Sep 14: 3rd T20, Trent Bridge, Nottingham (1330 GMT)

Ireland v England T20s (all at Malahide, Dublin, 1230 GMT)
Sep 17: 1st T20
Sep 19: 2nd T20
Sep 21: 3rd T20



ATHLETICS

Mahuchikh edges past Olyslagers in Silesia tussle

AFP
Chorzow, Poland

Ukraine's Olympic and world champion Yaroslava Mahuchikh notched up her 22nd Diamond League victory in a high jump shoot-out with Australian Nicola Olyslagers in Katowice yesterday.

The women's high jump was one of three disciplines along with the women's shot put and women's pole vault that were held in the main square of the southwestern Polish city.

The main Silesia Diamond League meet will be held in neighbouring Chorzow today, when Olympic champion Noah Lyles goes head-to-head with Jamaica's Kishane Thompson in a much-anticipated re-match of last year's Paris Games 100m final.

The high jump predictably turned into a battle between the two clear favourites.

Mahuchikh cleared 2.00 metres at her second attempt to heap the pressure on her Australian rival, the two-time defending indoor champion who won silver medals at the last two Olympics.

But it proved to be too much and Olyslagers had to be content with second place in 1.97m behind the world record holder who has now bagged three wins on the circuit this season.

Germany's Imke Onnen was a distant third with a best of 1.91m.

Only three other jumpers of the 10-strong field made the 1.88m mark in blistering heat and in front of a big crowd packed into temporary stands.

Jessica Schilder of the Netherlands wrapped up victory in the women's shot put with a best of 19.66m on her fifth of six attempts.

The two-time European champion saw off competition from Germany's reigning Olympic champion Yemisi Ogunleye (19.50m), with American Maggie Ewen rounding out the podium, a further centimetre adrift.

Victory in the pole vault went to France's Marie-Julie Bonnin, who managed a best of 4.70m. She failed three times at what would have been a new personal best of 4.77m.



Ukraine's Yaroslava Mahuchikh jumps to win during the women's high jump event of the Silesia Diamond League athletics meeting in the Katowice town square, Poland, yesterday. *(AFP)*

Hungary's Hanga Klekner took second with 4.60m on countback from Americans Brynn King and Hana Moll.

Start-up Grand Slam Track struggling to compensate athletes

Grand Slam Track is struggling to compensate its athletes after pulling its final meet of the year in Los Angeles, CEO Michael Johnson said yesterday, adding that the start-up did not receive funding that had been committed to it.

The track circuit lured in top talent with promises of massive paydays in its debut year but was forced to cancel the fourth and final meet on the calendar after trimming back another event in Philadelphia from three to two days.

Last month, Front Office Sports reported that Grand Slam Track owed around $13 million to athletes who had participated. "It is incredibly difficult to live with the reality that you've built something bigger than yourself while simultaneously feeling like you've let down the very people you set out to help," Johnson said in a statement.

"We promised that athletes would be fairly and quickly compensated. Yet, here we are struggling with our ability to compensate them."

The four-time Olympic gold medallist said the start-up was unable to meet dated payment timelines after it did not receive funding committed to it.

"We saw circumstances change in ways beyond our control," Johnson said.

Despite this, Johnson said Grand Slam Track has no plans to shut down and would move forward with a 2026 season after its athletes have been paid.

SPOTLIGHT

Disqualified cycling teams in row over UCI's GPS trackers

Reuters
Madrid

Several major cycling teams were disqualified from the Tour de Romandie Feminin by cycling's governing body UCI before the race even started yesterday after refusing to comply with the rules to test GPS trackers for a new safety system for riders.

UCI said Canyon-Sram zondacrypto, EF Education-Oatly, Lidl-Trek, Team Picnic PostNL and Team Visma-Lease a Bike were the teams excluded from the three-stage UCI Women's World-Tour event.

"The UCI regrets that certain teams have objected to the test by not nominating a rider to carry the tracking device and have therewith opted to be excluded from the Tour de Romandie Feminin," it said in a statement.

"In view of this situation, the UCI shall consider if other measures are warranted in accordance with the UCI Regulations."

The 63-gram GPS devices were intended to help UCI refine tracking software and "establish protocols to provide real-time data to race control, medical teams and UCI Commissaires."

Each team was required to have one test rider carry the device, with UCI saying details of the test were communicated to all teams last week. The safety initiative takes on added urgency following the death of 18-year-old Muriel Furrer, who died from injuries sustained in a crash during the junior women's road race at last year's world championships.

The teenager crashed in a wooded area after leaving the road and was found 90 minutes later by a track marshal before being airlifted to hospital.

"This system will strengthen the monitoring of rider safety during races and enable rapid response in case of incidents," UCI added.

"The initiative is part of the UCI's ongoing efforts to protect rider safety, and broader implementation of this technology is envisaged for coming seasons.

UCI said the technology will be deployed at this year's Road World Championships in Kigali, Rwanda, where all riders will carry the device.

"It should be noted that most of these teams are part of the Velon organisation which is the owner of its own data transmission system and is working on the development of its own GPS tracking system," it added.

In a joint statement, affected teams said they were "shocked and disappointed" by UCI's decision, adding that they had sent formal letters raising concerns about the "unilateral imposition of a GPS tracking device to just one of the riders" on each team.

"We made clear that we would not select a rider ourselves, nor install, remove, or maintain the device," they said.

"The UCI or its partner was free to select a rider and install the device at their own liability if they believe they are in their right to do so."

The teams added that they already had a "proven and collaborative safety tracking system" in place. "The reason why they don't want to nominate a rider themselves is still unknown and unanswered," they added.

MOTOGP

Points leader Marc Marquez seeks elusive first win in Austria Grand Prix



Ducati Lenovo Team's Spanish MotoGP rider Marc Marquez drives during the practice of Austrian Grand Prix at the Red Bull ring circuit in Spielberg, Austria, yesterday. *(AFP)*

AFP
Spielberg, Austria

Runaway leader Marc Marquez was in ominous form as MotoGP returned from its month-long mid-season break, topping practice in Austria yesterday.

The Spaniard is coasting towards a seventh elite title, which would draw him level with Italian legend Valentino Rossi and one shy of all-time record-holder Giacomo Agostini.

Despite turning up with five consecutive wins he knows he must do something this weekend that he has failed to achieve before in his storied career - win in Spielberg. "I've been super close many years in Austria," he said.

'I lose always against red'

"I lose always against red (Ducati) bikes but now I'm riding that red bike so let's see if we can fight for that victory" he added.

Since joining Ducati's factory team at the start of the season, Marquez has been almost uncatchable - notching up his fifth straight perfect weekend of sprint and race victories in Brno last month.

He goes into this 13th round of the 22-race campaign a massive 120 points clear of the pack led by his younger brother Alex of Ducati's satellite Gresini team.

Alex is realistically destined for second behind his trailblazing brother. The younger Marquez is 48 points clear of Francesco Bagnaia on the other Ducati factory bike, who is seeking a fourth straight Spielberg win.

Alex Marquez will have his work cut out because he must serve a long-lap penalty in tomorrow's main race after wiping out Honda's Joan Mir in an accident last time at the Czech MotoGP.

"A bigger challenge for us will be to do a perfect weekend to lose the minimum time on the long lap on Sunday," the 29-year-old said.

"You know, trying to be on the front row; trying to make some ground before doing the long lap, all that.

"So it will be a little bit of strategy."

Marc Marquez bossed practice, topping the first session by three-tenths of a second from Bagnaia, and by two-tenths from Pedro Acosta (KTM) in the afternoon session.

14-lap sprint today

Today's qualifying is followed by the 14-lap sprint with the main event 24 hours later.

One rider forced to miss out on the weekend action and the next race in Hungary is Honda LCR' Somkiat Chantra.

The Thai rider is recovering from surgery after sustaining ligament damage in his right knee in training after the Dutch MotoGP, which has already forced him out of races in Germany and Brno.

TENNIS

Rybakina rips Sabalenka to book Cincinnati semis

The 2022 Wimbledon winner will take on Iga Swiatek who beat Anna Kalinskaya 6-3, 6-4

AFP
Cincinnati

Elena Rybakina defeated top seed Aryna Sabalenka 6-1, 6-4 yesterday to knock the defending champion out in the quarter-finals of the WTA and ATP Cincinnati Open.

Rybakina, the 2022 Wimbledon winner, claimed a fifth victory in her 12-match personal rivalry with the world number one.

The victory was revenge for a loss to Sabalenka on Berlin grass two months ago.

Rybakina will play in a semi-final against Iga Swiatek, who defeated Anna Kalinskaya 6-3, 6-4.

Third-seeded reigning Wimbledon champion Swiatek dominated to break fresh ground at one of the only two 1000-level tournament where she has failed to reach a final

Rybakina was helped by 11 aces as she upset Sabalenka to achieve her first Cincinnati semi-final.

"I'm happy with the serve. It was the key today," Rybakina said. "I served really well.

"If she had been serving well it would have been a totally different match. It was also intense from the baseline. I just hope to continue like this."

Rybakina has won her last three matches against Swiatek, all played this season.

The Kazakh held her nerve in the second set as Sabalenka delivered a pair of love games, with Rybakina saving a pair of break points with aces to lead by a set and 5-3.

Swiatek needed 93 minutes and five match points to get past Kalinskaya and earn revenge for a loss she took in February 2024 in a Dubai semi-final. The former world number one finally moved into the Cincinnati final four on a steamy day after the 34th-ranked Kalinskaya saved four match points in the penultimate game.

But third seed Swiatek, enduring 30 Celsius temperatures, finally prevailed to advance to her fourth 1000-level semi-final of the season.

"We need to get used to the heat with how the world is changing," the winner of six Grand Slams said. "It's getting worse and worse, I guess."

Swiatek, who broke on three of 11 chances in the match, said the contest was "much different" from her loss last season against Kalinskaya.

"I just played my game. It was not easy but I'm happy that I stayed solid and kept my intensity," she said.

Swiatek heads into the semi-finals with 47 wins and the Wimbledon title in hand this season.



Elena Rybakina of Kazakhstan returns a shot against Aryna Sabalenka of Belarus during the Cincinnati Open at the Lindner Family Tennis Center. *(AFP)*



Iga Swiatek of Poland during her match against Anna Kalinskaya.

Defending champion Sinner storms into Cincinnati Open semi-finals

Cincinnati: Defending champion **Jannik Sinner** swept past Felix Auger-Aliassime 6-0, 6-2 on Thursday to reach the Cincinnati Open semi-finals, with the world number one extending his hardcourt winning streak to 25 matches.

Sinner delivered a dominant performance, capitalising on his opponent's 29 unforced errors to claim his first win in three meetings against the Canadian 23rd seed in just 71 minutes.

"Today I felt great on court. I think you saw that but every day is going to be different," Sinner said. "Tomorrow is a day off, which is good for me. We will try and put some reps in and then see what I can do in the semis."

The 23-year-old Italian became only the fifth man this century to record 25 consecutive victories on the surface alongside Novak Djokovic, Rafa Nadal, Roger Federer and Andy Murray.

He will next face French qualifier Terence Atmane, who continued his impressive run by upsetting Danish seventh seed Holger Rune 6-2 6-3.

"I don't think any words can describe how I feel right now," Atmane, 23, said. "It's pretty insane to be honest. I cannot believe it. "Being here in the semi-finals of a Masters 1000, breaking into the Top 100 and even more with the win tonight - it's also a lot of money for me, so it's going to



be very helpful for my career. It means a lot to me. I'm very emotional about it."

Canadian Open champion Ben Shelton advanced to the quarter-finals after beating Czech 22nd seed Jiri Lehecka 6-4 6-4.

"I'm hungry. I'm in a good rhythm," Shelton said. "I'm playing good tennis and my body feels good.

"I think the confidence along with not being satisfied, wanting to prove myself over and over every time that I'm out on the court, and having things that I want to get better at is a huge motivation for me and it pushes me every match."

Next up for the American fifth seed is German third seed Alexander Zverev.

In the women's draw, American second seed Coco Gauff secured her place in the quarter-finals with a 6-2 6-4 win over Italy's Lucia Bronzetti.

LYLES HINTS AT HITTING OLYMPIC FORM BEFORE THOMPSON RE-MATCH AT SILESIA DIAMOND LEAGUE

Chorzów, Poland: Despite an injury-induced delay to the start of his season, Olympic 100m champion Noah Lyles reckons his form is as good as - if not better than - last summer when he claimed gold in Paris.

Lyles won a thrilling race at the Stade de France just over a year ago by the narrowest of margins and went on to claim bronze in the 200m when suffering from Covid.

For the first time since that Olympic 100m final, the self-proclaimed showman will on Saturday come face to face with Kishane Thompson, the 24-year-old Jamaican he pipped by just five-thousandths of a second in Paris.

"The 100m is obviously the glory race, it's obviously the one that gets you the most attention," Lyles said yesterday ahead of the Silesia Diamond League meet in the Polish city of Chorzow.

"I can say that if I'd won the 200m and lost the 100 it wouldn't have hit the same going back to the US for sure and probably even in the world it'd be a lot different."

Lyles played down the fact that he had not met Thompson since that balmy night in the French capital.

"Personally, I wanted to just do a one-on-one race in Jamaica," he said.

"I thought that would have just been amazing, me and Kishane right next to each other, lane by lane, just us two duking it out.



"I feel like we could have sold out the crowd for sure, I thought that would have been a lot of fun."

Instead, the duo will face off in Poland with Lyles describing his run-in to the September 13-21 world championships in Tokyo as "the most important races of the year". "These are the biggest competitions, at high levels. This is literally prepping myself to say, 'This is what it's going to be like, if not more intense, as I get closer to Tokyo'.

"I need to get in that frame of mind. So I need to be in those situations."

Lyles said he was rounding into form: "The results I've seen in practice have shown that I'm exactly where I was last year, or heading in the same direction as I was last year, if not better."

The 28-year-old American predicted a fast race today, with a quartet of tried and tested US teammates in the shape of Kenny Bednarek, Christian Coleman, Lindsey Courtney and Trayvon Bromell, as well as South African Akani Simbine in the field.

"You basically have the Olympic final maybe missing two people, but adding in some just-as-fast people," Lyles said.

"Having Kishane there makes it even better. It's going to be a moment that everyone's looking at their calendar, saying 'OK this is what I'm basing my world championships picks off'."

Lyles, however, was in no doubt about who was the biggest draw.

"I'm going to just put it like this: there are definitely races that have Noah and there are races that don't have Noah and I've watched the numbers for races that don't have me and they don't do very well," he said.

"You watch the races with me and you're like, 'Oh wow yeah there's a lot more viewership'. I'm not saying I'm the face of the sport, I'm just saying that there's a lot more interest when I run it.

"A showman, a rock star, yes that's a very good way to describe how I like to view myself when I go into a track meet and how I want to interact with the crowd."

COMMENT

Hodgkinson happy to be back on track ahead of Tokyo worlds

AFP
Chorzow, Poland

Olympic champion Keely Hodgkinson said she was "super happy" to make her comeback to competition, a year after taking 800m gold at the Paris Games and in timely fashion before next month's world championships.

The 23-year-old Briton, also a two-time world silver medallist, will compete in the two-lap race at the Diamond League meeting in Silesia, Poland, today.

"Yeah, it's been a long time, over a year since Paris," Hodgkinson told a press conference yesterday. "That wasn't my plan to be this late, but I'm just super happy to get back in the start line. "I missed it. I missed it a lot. This is what I trained to do. So I can't wait to get out there and just give it my absolute best. And yeah, we'll see what happens."

It marks the end of a long road back from a hamstring injury for Hodgkinson.

She was forced to withdraw from an event in February that bore her name - the Keely Klassic, in which she wanted a tilt at the long-standing world indoor 800m world record.

Hodgkinson then pulled out of last month's Diamond League meet in London.

But just a month away from the world championships in Tokyo, Hodgkinson will return to action in southwest Poland.

Perfect line-up

In what looks like a perfect line-up for a comeback after so long out of elite competition, the field is relatively moderate.

Oratile Nowe of Botswana has the best season's best with 1min 57.49sec, while the field also includes the Australian duo of Abbey Caldwell and Catriona Bisset, American Raevyn Rogers and Slovakia's Gabriela Gajanova, who finished runner-up to Hodgkinson in the European championships in Rome last year.

Her biggest rivals such as Kenya's Mary Moraa, Ethiopian Tsige Duguma and South African Prudence Sekgodiso are all absent, while Hodgkinson's in-form training partner Georgia Hunter Bell will race the 1,500m in Chorzow.

GOLF

Hot putter carries MacIntyre to three-shot lead at BMW Championship

AFP
Washington

Robert MacIntyre used a red-hot putter to birdie the last six holes and surge to a three-shot lead over Tommy Fleetwood in the US PGA Tour BMW Championship in Maryland on Thursday.

McIntyre delivered a masterclass on the rain-soaked greens at Caves Valley after an afternoon thunderstorm halted play for more than two hours.

"The last six holes is probably as good as I've ever putted in a stretch of holes, just so consistent," MacIntyre said after posting an eight-under par 62.

"When you get the eye on, it's free flowing and it's nice."

His late burst carried him past world number one Scottie Scheffler - who was in the clubhouse on four-under 66 and ended the day alone in third.

Fleetwood overtook him with a 33-foot birdie at 18 to cap a 65.

Two-under after his second bogey of the day on 12, MacIntyre poured in a 66-foot birdie putt at the par-three 13th to launch his scoring closing run.

He followed with a 40-footer at 14 and a 17-foot birdie at 15. He fired out of the rough to 12 feet at 16 and curled in that birdie putt, then drained a 22-footer at the tough par-three 17th.

MacIntyre capped his round with a five-foot birdie at 18.

The 29-year-old Scot's longest birdie streak on the PGA Tour - beating his previous of four straight - helped him match his career-low round on tour.

MacIntyre, who finished runner-up to JJ Spaun at the US Open in June, said he'd learned during the final-round rain delay at Oakmont and kept himself warmed up during Thursday's delay.

"It came at a tough time, but it gave the course a little more to us," he said. "The greens were really slick early on when they were dry. When I went back out, they felt a little bit slower, a little bit smoother."

Fleetwood had five birdies in an impressive bogey-free round, bouncing back after a late fade on Sunday saw him come up short in his latest bid for a first US tour title at the St. Jude Championship.

Scheffler, whose four victories this season include major triumphs at the PGA Championship and the British Open, got off to a strong start with three birdies in the first four holes. After back-to-back bogeys at nine and 10 he birdied three of his last four, drilling a 16-foot putt at 15 and a five-footer at 16 before draining a 26-foot birdie at the last. Scheffler said the course was "significantly softer" after the storm delay.

Fifty players are in the field this week and Scheffler, the leader in the playoff points race, is already assured of making it into the 30-player field for next week's Tour Championship in Atlanta.

Rory McIlroy, world number two and second in the playoff standings who opted to skip the first playoff event, carded an "awful" even par 70 that featured three bogeys and three birdies.



Robert MacIntyre of Scotland plays his shot from the eighth tee during the second round of the BMW Championship 2025 at Caves Valley Golf Club in Owings Mills, Maryland. *(AFP)*

BUNDESLIGA

Bayern's crown up for grabs after rocky summer

'FOR US, IT WILL BE IMPORTANT TO GO OUR OWN WAY'

AFP
Berlin



Pretenders to the crown Borussia Dortmund, Bayer Leverkusen and cup holders Stuttgart are priming themselves for a run at Bayern Munich's Bundesliga title after a frustrating summer transfer window for the Bavarian giants.

Bayern travel to Stuttgart on today for the Franz Beckenbauer Supercup - the season opener which pits the defending league champions against the reigning German Cup victors. Winners of 12 of the past 13 Bundesliga titles, Bayern occupy their usual role as favourites for the crown.

This summer, however, the 34-time league champions have not had everything go their own way.

Efforts to lure Florian Wirtz away from Leverkusen fell flat, with the German footballer of the year opting rather for a move to the Premier League and Liverpool.

Although Bayern secured attacker Luis Diaz from the English champions, they lost Thomas Mueller, Leroy Sane and Eric Dier on free transfers. Kingsley Coman is set for a move to Saudi Arabia, Mathys Tel made his Spurs loan permanent and efforts to sign Germany striker Nick Woltemade from Stuttgart have been rebuffed.

Speaking with the Bundesliga website, Bayern captain **Joshua Kimmich** said the shifting sands across the league this summer made it hard to see who would be their main rivals.

"We'll see who knocks at the top. For us, it will be important to go our own way. We can't influence what the others will do," Kimmich said.

Kimmich nominated former side RB Leipzig to bounce back after a poor 2024/25 campaign, where they missed out on Europe for the first time in the top flight.

The Saxon club have brought in several young talents including winger Johan Bakayoko and midfielder Arthur Vermeeren, in former Liverpool coach Jurgen Klopp's first summer transfer window as Red Bull global head of football.

"Leipzig have a good team. Because Leipzig aren't in European competition, they'll be able to concentrate on the Bundesliga," Kimmich added.

Leverkusen, Bayern's principal rival across the past two seasons, have undergone a clear-out this summer. Most of the main contributors to their stunning unbeaten 2023/24 league and cup double have moved on.

Wirtz, along with wing-back Jeremie Frimpong have signed with Liverpool. Midfield conductor Granit Xhaka has also moved to the Premier League, while Germany defender Jonathan Tah has joined title rivals Bayern.

The biggest loss of all, however, is coach Xabi Alonso, with the Spaniard departing to join Real Madrid. His replacement, former Manchester United boss Erik ten Hag, will be looking to revive his own reputation while cobbling together a squad with several new arrivals.

Impressive last season in finishing third, Eintracht Frankfurt are also rebuilding, having lost centre-forward Hugo Ekitike to Liverpool in July, just six months after winger Omar Marmoush moved to Manchester City.

Quietly building under Bundesliga-winning coach Niko Kovac, Borussia Dortmund could again trouble old foes Bayern this term.

Kovac took over the reins in January with Dortmund flailing but helped the club rise from 11th to fourth, picking up 22 of a possible 24 points to end the season.

The addition of Jobe Bellingham will provide steel in midfield, while the only major loss is winger Jamie Gittens who moved to Chelsea, having struggled for game time under Kovac.

Cup winners Stuttgart, who finished second ahead of Bayern in 2023/24, look set to continue troubling the big guns.

Stuttgart captain Atakan Karazor told AFP and other media on Thursday: "We have a very special team... we've got quality players in every position - even some that people haven't heard of."

Karazor said the key man is coach Sebastian Hoeness, who has taken Stuttgart from relegation battlers to cup winners and European football in just over two years at the helm.

"An amazing, amazing coach. You can see his handwriting on everything the team does. From the moment he came in, the mindset of the team changed," the midfielder said.

ASIAN CHAMPIONS LEAGUE ELITE

Al Sadd drawn with defending champs Al Ahli of Saudi

Reuters
Kuala Lumpur

Defending champions Al Ahli will face a reunion with Roberto Firmino in the league phase of the Asian Champions League Elite after the Saudi Pro League side were drawn to meet the former Liverpool forward's new side Al Sadd of Qatar yesterday.

Firmino was instrumental in the Jeddah-based outfit lifting the continental title for the first time in May when he inspired Al Ahli to a 2-0 win over Japan's Kawasaki Frontale in the final before leaving the club in July.

The Brazilian has since joined the Qatar Stars League (QSL) champions and the two clubs have been drawn to face one another in Doha during the eight-match league phase of the competition, which will kick off on September 15.

The tournament for which the draw was held in Kuala Lumpur yesterday, will again adopt the Swiss league format for the opening round after its introduction last season, with the 24 participants divided into 12-team groups for both west and east Asia.

The first eight finishers on each side of the Asian confederation will progress to the last 16, which will be played in March with the quarter-finals, semi-finals and final to be held in Saudi Arabia from April 17 to 25.

Al Ahli will also face Shabab Al Ahli, Sharjah FC and Al Wahda, all from the United Arab Emirates, Uzbekistan's Nasaf, Iraqi outfit Al Shorta as well as Al Gharafa and Al Duhail of Qatar.

Four-times Asian champions Al Hilal, also from Saudi Arabia, will take on Al Sadd, Al Shorta, Shabab Al Ahli, Nasaf, Al Duhail, Al Wahda, Sharjah FC and Al Gharafa.

In the east, Japanese champions Vissel Kobe will meet South Korean trio Ulsan HD, FC Seoul and Gangwon FC, Melbourne City from Australia, China's Shanghai Port, Chengdu Rongcheng and Shanghai Shenhua plus Johor Darul Ta'zim from Malaysia.

Ulsan HD, winners of the Asian title in 2012 and 2020, play Japan's Vissel Kobe, Sanfrecce Hiroshima and Machida Zelvia, Shanghai Port, Shanghai Shenhua and Chengdu Rongcheng from China as well as Melbourne City and Thailand's Buriram United.

Meanwhile Indian Super League (ISL) outfit FC Goa will host Cristiano Ronaldo-led Al Nassr on October 22 while the Gaurs will travel to Saudi Arabia for the away fixture on November 5.

Yesterday, both sides were drawn in Group D for the 2025-26 AFC Champions League Two group stage with the other two teams being Al Zawraa SC and FC Istiklol.

FC Goa will play in a continental tournament for the second time, after competing in the AFC Champions League 2021. It secured a place in the playoff round after winning the Super Cup in May.

"This is truly a once-in-a-lifetime moment for FC Goa," club CEO Ravi Puskur said.

"To host Al Nassr and Cristiano Ronaldo is arguably the biggest game in Indian club football history."

Ronaldo, 40, has yet to win a major trophy since signing for the Riyadh club in 2022 and the team is expected to be at full strength when the action starts in September.

Al Nassr, which finished third in the Saudi Pro League last season, also boasts famous names such as former Liverpool star Sadio Mane and Joao Felix, the Portuguese forward who signed from Chelsea in July.



South Korean former football player Park Joo-ho shows the paper slip of Al Sadd from Qatar during the AFC Champions League Elite 2025-26 league stage draw in Kuala Lumpur yesterday.

FOCUS

Arteta hits back at criticism of Arsenal captain Odegaard

AFP
London



Mikel Arteta has slammed calls for **Martin Odegaard** to be stripped of the Arsenal captaincy by insisting there is "no question" the Norway midfielder is the right man to lead their Premier League title challenge.

Former Arsenal skipper Tony Adams recently urged Arteta to give England midfielder Declan Rice the armband instead of Odegaard. But the Gunners boss mounted a strong defence of Odegaard's leadership qualities after revealing Arsenal's players had voted for him to be retained as captain.

"My opinion is clear, and it's not just my opinion. It's all the staff and especially the players," Arteta told reporters yesterday.

"I asked them to vote for the captain and I got the results yesterday. By a mile, by a big, big (margin), by 100 miles, everybody chose the same person, Martin Odegaard, which is the most clear sign that you can have.

"It's how they feel about who has to be their captain, to defend, to improve, and win the matches that we want to win, so I think there is no question about that."

Arsenal, who last won the English title in 2004, have finished as Premier League runners-up for the last three seasons and are without a trophy since the 2020 FA Cup. Their inability to last the pace in the title race has led to mounting questions about Arsenal's mental strength, with Odegaard among those in the firing line.

Arsenal title winner Adams, quoted in the Irish Independent, said: "Every now and again as a manager, you have to put someone who reflects you, who reflects the football club, that you think can actually take you to the next level.

"You've got someone in there who's going to play every game all season, that's going to encourage people to come in and lay the foundations of a title-winning team. Declan Rice can do that, Odegaard can't. Come on Arteta, make him captain."

But former Arsenal captain Arteta said he could talk about leadership "for hours" and had no doubts about Odegaard's ability to inspire his teammates.

"What matters the most is how these guys feel about who needs to lead them, how they feel comfortable, who is going to push them, who is going to give them support when it's happening," he said.

Arsenal kick off their Premier League campaign with a trip to Manchester United on Sunday, then host newly-promoted Leeds before a difficult stretch that will see them play champions Liverpool, Nottingham Forest, Manchester City and Newcastle. Arteta admits that run will provide early evidence of their potential in the title race.

"Yes, especially with the consistency that we showed in the last three years, and now the margins, we know how small they are," he said.

"We know that the competition has increased the level with recruitment, with another year together." Arteta confirmed close-season signings Viktor Gyokeres and Martin Zubimendi will be fit to play at Old Trafford tomorrow.

'Obsessed' Sesko will star for Man Utd, says Amorim

Ruben Amorim has backed Benjamin Sesko to torment Premier League defenders saying Manchester United's new striker is ready to face Arsenal in their top-flight opener on Sunday.
Sesko joined United from RB Leipzig in a deal worth up to £73.7mn ($99mn) last Saturday.
Armed with the predatory instincts and physical stature, the 22-year-old Slovenian will spearhead Amorim's bid to revitalise United after their worst season since 1973-74.
Sesko could join fellow United new-boys Matheus Cunha and Bryan Mbeumo in Amorim's overhauled attack, starting with Arsenal's visit to Old Trafford this weekend. "He can play different types of football," Amorim told reporters yesterday.
"He is going to learn but he has a great potential and I can see Ben being a striker for Manchester United for a lot of years.
"That's why we paid so much money to have a striker that will have his history in our club."
Asked if Sesko could start against Arsenal, the United boss said: "We didn't have a lot of time but he's ready.
"Physically, he's ready. That is a big component in our league. Then, he's really smart. Every detail that he asks, he's a guy that is always thinking.
"He spends all afternoon here working on his fitness, so he's ready to play. We will see if he's going to start."
Sesko scored 21 goals for German side Leipzig last term and has made a good first impression on Amorim at United's new-look Carrington training complex.
"He's one guy who stays here, has lunch, and goes to the medical department, does the stretching," he said.
"He is always thinking about football. He's really obsessed about that and that is a good thing because you don't have to think about that aspect with that young guy.
"I don't need to tell Ben, 'Ben, this is Manchester United, a lot of pressure, you have to perform, you need to be ready for the physicality, we need to be ready, every game is like do or die'.
Sesko's arrival in Manchester has raised fresh questions over the future of United striker Rasmus Hojlund. The 22-year-old Denmark international has been strongly linked with an exit, just two years on from joining from Atalanta. Hojlund said on United's pre-season tour that he wants to stay at United, but reports of a potential move to AC Milan persist.
"He is one more option," Amorim said. "We will see. We are focused on this game and Rasmus is still our player."

SPOTLIGHT

Frank urges Spurs fans to back Tel

AFP
London

Thomas Frank urged Tottenham fans to back Mathys Tel in today's Premier League opener against Burnley after the French forward was racially abused this week. Tel endured racist taunts on social media following his missed penalty in the shoot-out defeat against Paris Saint-Germain in the UEFA Super Cup on Wednesday.

Tottenham said they were "disgusted" at the abuse and Tel's teammates Dominic Solanke and Richarlison sent messages of support online.

Anti-discrimination charity Kick It Out warned players may think twice about taking penalties in the future after the abuse of the 20-year-old.

Ahead of former Brentford boss Frank's first league game in charge of Tottenham, the Dane demanded Tel be shown love and respect from supporters in north London this weekend.

"It's of course terrible what happened to Matty and we're doing everything we can to support him in this situation," Frank told reporters yesterday.

"He's a strong person and with hopefully the support from his family, friends and us he will get through it, but also there's no real Tottenham supporter that will ever do that.

"The real Tottenham supporters that we'll see tomorrow at the stadium, they'll back him, I expect them to.

"Listen, in tough times we step up together and I expect the fans to give him a really, really, really big cheer tomorrow."